

Introduction

The Poet's Life

JEAN-NICOLAS-ARTHUR RIMBAUD was born on October 20, 1854, in Charleville, a city in the Ardennes in northern France. His mother, Vitalie Cuif, came from a family of farmers. His father, Frédéric Rimbaud, was an infantry captain. Rimbaud's earliest school years were spent at the Institution Rossat in Charleville. He began attending the Collège de Charleville in the spring of 1865, in the *classe de 7e*. In October of that year, he entered the *classe de 6e*. At the end of the year he made his first communion. Young Rimbaud learned with such ease and such rapidity that he skipped the *5e classe* and entered the *4e classe* in October, 1866.

He had begun writing at an early age. At thirteen, in 1868, he wrote a letter in Latin hexameters to the imperial prince. In 1869, his Latin poem *Jugurtha* won a first prize at the Concours Académique. His first known French poem, *Les Étrennes des Orphelins*, was composed in the same year.

During 1870, Rimbaud's poetic genius became fully manifest in the twenty-two poems he composed. The young teacher Georges Izambard was Rimbaud's mentor and friend during his last year at the *collège*. The boy's first attempt to attract literary attention was in May, 1870, when he sent a series of poems to Théodore de Banville, for publication in *Le Parnasse Contemporain*. At graduation, in August, he received many prizes.

War broke out that summer. On the 29th of August, Arthur Rimbaud made his first escape to Paris, by train, and was put into Mazas Prison at the end of the trip because he had not purchased a full ticket. Izambard was instrumental in having him released. Later, on foot, Rimbaud set out for Belgium, an experience which inspired such poems as *Ma Bohème*, *Le Buffet*, and *Au Cabaret-Vert*.

Early in 1871, Rimbaud spent considerable time in the library of Charleville. *Les Assis* is reminiscent of this setting. There was another trip to Paris in February and a return on foot to Charleville. His two letters of May, to Izambard and Izambard's friend, Paul Demeny, are in fact treatises on Rimbaud's conception of poetry. The boy's disposition was strongly anti-religious at this time, testified to in such a poem as *Les Premières Communions*. In Charleville he enjoyed the company of Bretagne, who had once known Verlaine and who urged Rimbaud to write to Verlaine. After a first exchange of letters, Verlaine invited Rimbaud to Paris. At the end of September, Rimbaud, armed with new poems, including *Le Bateau ivre*, went to Paris and stayed for a few days with Paul Verlaine and his wife Mathilde.

The next year and a half were very much dominated by Verlaine, by an enthusiastic, troubled, and at times tragic relationship. The two poets were together in Latin Quarter cafés, in gatherings of poets, in intermittent trips to Brussels and London. Verlaine's marriage was threatened by such behavior, and he made efforts to leave Rimbaud and live again with his wife. At times Rimbaud wearied of the quarrels with his friend, and would leave him and return to Charleville. Both Verlaine's mother and Rimbaud's mother tried to intervene.

Rimbaud undoubtedly began writing some of the *Illuminations* in London in 1872, and was engaged in writing *Une Saison en enfer* in April, 1873, at his mother's farm in Roche. The definitive break between Verlaine and Rimbaud occurred in Brussels, in July, as the result of a violent quarrel. When Rimbaud said he had decided to leave his friend, Verlaine fired a revolver and wounded Rimbaud in the left wrist. Verlaine was arrested and condemned by the Belgian police court to two years in prison. His arm in a sling, Rimbaud returned to Roche where he completed *Une Saison en enfer*. He was nineteen, and his literary work was over, save possibly for some *Illuminations* which he may have written during the next two years.

Une Saison en enfer was printed in October, 1873, at Rimbaud's request, by a Brussels printer, and a few copies were distributed to friends in Paris. But Rimbaud almost immediately lost interest in the work. In early 1874, he met the poet Germain Nouveau in Paris and went with him to England. He gave French lessons in London and in Scotland. After spending part of the winter in Charleville, Rimbaud went to Germany early in 1875; in

Stuttgart he saw Verlaine for the last time. Further traveling took him to Switzerland and Italy. By the end of 1875 he was back in Charleville and engaged in studying languages: Spanish, Italian, modern Greek, Arabic, and Dutch.

In Holland, in the spring of 1876, Rimbaud enlisted in the Dutch army and traveled as far as Batavia. He deserted and worked his way back to Europe, reaching Charleville on foot on the last day of the year. In Vienna, in the spring of 1877, he was robbed and expelled from Austria. After traveling through Sweden and Denmark, and making a useless attempt to go to Egypt, he again returned to Charleville where he spent the winter.

In 1878 he worked for a while on the island of Cyprus as a foreman in a stone quarry. After a period of illness in Charleville, he returned to Cyprus in 1880 and from there went to Egypt and finally Aden. There he worked for an export company, dealing principally in coffee. He traveled as buyer for the company and explored the Somalia and Galla countries. He reported to the Société de Géographie on these explorations. In 1887 he sold guns to King Menelik of Choa. His expeditions became more and more dangerous. Menelik cheated him, and Rimbaud's financial losses were heavy. Between 1888 and 1891, Rimbaud worked for a coffee exporter in Harar. In February, 1891, he suffered from a tumor in his right knee. The malady spread and caused him to return to Marseilles in May. His leg was amputated in the Hôpital de la Conception in Marseilles. He returned to Roche to be with his mother and sister, but his condition grew worse. Hoping he would recover in the Mediterranean climate, he returned to Marseilles where he was again hospitalized and where he died on November 10, 1891, at the age of thirty-seven.

History of the Work and its Publication

MOST OF RIMBAUD'S WORK was written between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, and during those few years he gave little thought to its publication. Soon after this time, within a year or two at the most, he detached himself from all literary activity and never returned to it. The work was quite literally abandoned. In 1873, following the Brussels drama and the break with Verlaine, Rimbaud did publish, on his own initiative, the small booklet *Une Saison en enfer*. But as soon as the work was published and a few copies distributed, he lost all interest and seemed to have forgotten it.

Edited by Paul Verlaine, *Les Illuminations* were published for the first time by *La Vogue* in 1886. This edition was not complete, and it had typographical errors and misreadings which were perpetuated in later editions. In his introduction Verlaine states that the poems were written

between 1873 and 1875, during Rimbaud's travels in Belgium, England, and Germany. This dating was contested by Paterne Berrichon in an edition published in 1912 (with a preface by Claudel) and by the important Pléiade edition, of 1946, prepared by Rolland de Renéville and Jules Mouquet. Since that time, the investigations conducted by Bouillane de Lacoste give credence to the original dating suggested by Verlaine, but there is no absolute proof for placing *Les Illuminations* before or after *Une Saison en enfer*.

The first edition of the poems came out in 1891 (the year of Rimbaud's death), edited by L. Genonceaux. It contained four sonnets not written by Rimbaud. This was followed by two more accurate and more carefully prepared editions: one, by Verlaine, in 1895 (Vanier) and the second, by Paterne Berrichon, in 1898 (Mercure de France). The first critical edition, with variant readings, was published by Bouillane de Lacoste in 1939 (Mercure de France). This text has been adopted on the whole by the two most trustworthy editions now available: the Pléiade edition (1946) and the Classiques Garnier (1961) prepared by Suzanne Bernard. *Les Stupra*, erotic sonnets, was first published in a private edition in 1923. The prose story, *Un Cœur sous une soutane*, was first printed in 1924, with a preface by Aragon and Breton. In Pascal Pia's edition of the *Oeuvres Complètes*, in 1931 (Maastricht), Rimbaud's poems from the *Album Zutique* were included.

Rimbaud's letters concerning his literary life were first published in various periodicals. In 1931 they were collected and published by Jean-Marie Carré. Many errors were corrected in the Pléiade edition. The letters written in Africa were first published by Paterne Berrichon, the poet's brother-in-law, who took the liberty of making many changes in the texts. The original texts of twenty-eight of these letters (which belong to the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet) have been accurately reproduced in the Pléiade edition.

Rimbaud's Position Today

THE LIFE AND THE WORK of Rimbaud have been studied for not much more than half a century. Those facts concerning the poet's biography which are verifiable are not very numerous. At best, all that is available provides merely the sketch of a life in which several important questions are left unanswered. Despite our ever-increasing familiarity with Rimbaud's writing, it still ranks among the most difficult works in French literature. The poems are the most accessible part of his work. Today most of the poems present few difficulties to a reader trained in the reading of modern poetry, but *Une Saison en enfer* is still a troublesome text. Its elliptical outbursts, its seeming contradictions, and the lack of transitions between its various parts force a reader into maximum attentiveness and

agility. Moreover, the psychic experience related in *Une Saison* is as much that of our age as it is of one adolescent poet. Finally, the prose poems of *Les Illuminations* are the most difficult to fathom. The experience behind them is so complex that the form into which they are cast had to be equally complex, equally apprehensive of false simplifications and evasive linguistic banalities.

A new era in the understanding of Rimbaud has begun. Heretofore most critical-interpretive studies have exploited poetic data with the usually unavowed intention of advancing a personal psychological theory. Rimbaud's poetic act has been countless times explained in accord with a given psychological or even religious conviction. These monographs are not without value, but they tend to irritate the new reader, the new, impartial reader in search of enlightenment. Etiemble's thesis of gigantic proportions, *Le Mythe de Rimbaud*, appearing in 1952-54, denounced the critical method so widely used in turning Rimbaud into this or that mythical figure: angel or demon, Catholic or surrealist, *voyant* or *voyou*. The castigating effect of Etiemble's investigation has been, in part, responsible for initiating a new type of study in which the focus is on the problem of poetic expression.

Rimbaud's art is a poetic language of an exceptional freshness, enrolled in the service of a few very permanent and universal themes. The newness, the novelty of this language is still felt today by the youngest generation of readers. The ultimate lesson, which the art of Rimbaud teaches, states that poetry is one means, among other means, by which life may be changed and renewed. Poetry is one possible stage in a life process. Within the limits of man's fate, the poet's language is able to express his existence although it is not able to create it.

The three major works of Rimbaud, the poems, *Une Saison en enfer*, and *Les Illuminations*, testify to a modern revolt and to that kind of liberation which follows revolt. *Une Saison* is a work of interrogation because it is close to the crisis and the disorder. *Les Illuminations* is more affirmative because it is closer to the resolving of contradictions. In comparison with *Une Saison*, of a metaphysical order, *Les Illuminations* leads us into a very concrete world of rooms and landscapes and cities where the poet attains a harmonization between desire and reality. *Génie* is the fusion of an ideal being and a human being. This prose poem is both a climactic piece in Rimbaud's art and the apotheosis of a world. In it the poet is engineer showing us the plans of a future universe.

Was he prophet? genius? mythical figure? He was a poet, but no ordinary poet. He was a child expressing himself in the language of a man. *Génie* combines the virile tenderness and the virile vigor of a man.

Our age is one of revolt, and Rimbaud has given, in his literary work and in the example of his life, one of the most vibrant expressions of this

revolt. Man's mind is no longer focused on pronouncing the truth or the falseness of a given fact or a given idea. Rather, it is bent on following the direction of an idea. It easily moves back to the origin of an idea, to memories attached to an idea, to very ancient stages and to very recent ones in the history of an idea.

Rimbaud's book seems to us today a dramatic return to consciousness. There was nothing unusual about his life, save that the major events, transpiring while he was a practicing poet, were swift: the interruption of formal study, hatred for his provincial life, his friendship with Verlaine, the discovery that very few people in Paris were interested in him or in his talent, the break with Verlaine, the writing of *Une Saison en enfer* and, soon after that, the irrevocable giving up of literature. Revolt, in some form or other, is everywhere manifest in these five years of Rimbaud's life, and yet nothing completely or satisfactorily explains his revolt.

In an almost histrionic way Rimbaud stifled in himself hope, poetry, ambition, love. There was no chance for any gradual development between the joys of childhood (he speaks of so often) and his existence as a man. This existence, because of its closeness to childhood, was judged immediately as false. All trace of illusions disappeared abruptly. In his own words, childhood is defined by Rimbaud as certainty, as a treasure, as something pure and exempt from doubt and falsehood. He recognizes the noblest efforts of man, and names them: love, ambition, poetry, science, religion—but he designates them as vain, as masks concealing a void.

With such a sentence as: *la vraie vie est absente*, we can feel that Rimbaud's illusions have been destroyed. This is the profound meaning of his most perfect poem, *Mémoire*. It is a piece composed of material realities, presented in an Eden-like innocence, which the poet has renounced. Rimbaud believed that his happiness as a child must have existed in some other age, and he was forced, but briefly, to recreate in his art that age of legends peopled by centaurs, fairies, fauns, and angels. Rimbaud's work is a cleavage between himself and a certain past that he faintly evokes.

PART 1

Poems